

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
May 3, 2020; 4th Sunday of Easter, Year A

SCRIPTURE READING Acts 2:41-47

The result of the Apostle Peter's famous speech to the crowds following the coming of the Holy Spirit on that first day of Pentecost:

⁴¹ So those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

SCRIPTURE READING John 10:2-4

² **The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.**

SERMON

Wonders & Signs

Rev. Martin McGeachy

I know you're all aware of the 12 days of Christmas, that December 25 is just the start of the 12-day official Christmas season in the Christian calendar, culminating in 12th Night, or what you will, and Epiphany. But in our current culture, people tend to celebrate Easter once, if they're going to at all. Easter morning, come to church, go for an egg hunt, all hail the giant rabbit, and done. Check. But Easter is a seven-Sunday extravaganza, a fifty day resurrection party which ends explosively on Pentecost Sunday. Today is the 4th Sunday of Easter—barely halfway! Honestly, sometimes I feel like it drags on a bit—it can be hard to be upbeat and victorious that many weeks in a row. But Oh My God, I need every drip and drab of new life that Easter has to offer this year. I'm so tired of not touching other people. We are social animals, and we are not created for distancing from one another.

Almost every morning, I turn on the news, and very quickly begin to fantasize about having super-powers. I want to do something to fix this! Maybe Jesus will come today—I know, we've been told when he next shows up, the four horsemen of the apocalypse may be close behind, so maybe today Jesus could send an emissary, a big beautiful take-no-prisoners angel like Leslie Jones from *Saturday Night Live*, who would start kickin' butt and takin' names (not mine, of course, I'm one of the good guys, right?), and then call up a wind of Holy Spirit and blow the virus into the sun. Or some variation; I'm not particular.

Where are the apostles of old, who had the special powers and magic Jesus Juice? “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.” And the result? Everyone got along, “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” And they all lived happily ever after. The end, amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Um, except that isn’t the end. More like the beginning. That’s chapter 2 of Acts. Shall we read ahead?

- Chapter 4, Peter and John arrested, Chapter 5 they were flogged...
- Chapter 6, Stephen arrested, stoned to death chapter 7 (ouch!)...
- Let’s see, Saul arrested, James executed, Paul stoned...
- Beating, chasing, rioting, head chopped off (John the Baptist; that was earlier) it goes on and on.

Being a disciple did not have good health benefits. Even back in the day, there may have been periods of wonders and signs, rainbows and agape feasts, but there were days of virus, death, fear, locked doors, and persecution. Even for the guys with the super Jesus Juice.

Let me tell you a secret regarding our reading from the book of Acts. It wasn’t about apostles with superpowers saving the day for the rest of the mob—they were all in this together, sharing all things in common. No one was in need. That truly was a wonder and a miracle that they were all performing in harmony.

I’m sure you’ve heard by now that there’s a new drug called *remdesivir*, which is a promising possible treatment for those sick with COVID-19; and you church family members have probably perked up your ears at the name of the company that owns remdesivir, Gilead. Naturally, I was curious about the company, and went to their website, which indicates that their core values include a commitment to inclusion of all, and sharing equal access to healthcare all over the world, regardless of nationality, politics, or economics, in particular funding “projects that support underserved communities that have systematically experienced greater social or economic obstacles to health.” (<https://www.gilead.com/purpose/giving>). Now it’s too early to draw conclusions, I know, but apparently, there is a balm in Gilead. And we told you so. It is my prayer that this drug does all it promises, and more, bringing health where there was sickness all over the world—and if in doing so, the Gilead brand name becomes globally associated with healing, sharing, caring, inclusion, and diversity, I’m down with that.

It’s just a hope right now. A dream for the future. And it’s the same balm for the world that Gilead Presbyterian Church in some form has been offering for 277 years. It’s the dream, hope and the reality of the church described in Acts 2. “They had all things in common. They shared with everyone, as any had need. They broke bread at home with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” Medicine, Money, Food, Gospel, Prayers. When we as individuals, or as a church, or in

our companies, even big pharmaceutical corporations, choose to miraculously perform the signs and wonders of love, lives and souls are saved, healed with the balm of God.

I know you're tired, frustrated, depressed, longing for this to be over. But listen, Easter is still here even amidst the pandemic. Even though we were all stuck inside our homes on Easter morning, after church I heard voices on the lawn, and saw a small family having an Easter egg hunt in the azalea garden that has been so lovingly tended by our volunteers. One little toddler and her mom and sister, filling a small basket. I guess they missed one, because I found this Easter egg in front of the church doors this week. Thank you, somebody, for the reminder that Easter lives.

Another reminder that I had was from my favorite tree on the Gilead property—an ordinary Crabapple tree that for most of the year isn't much to notice, but for about a week in the early spring bursts forth with the most vibrantly pink blossoms, and one of my favorite things is to stand under its branches on clear sunny days and gaze in wonder up through the deep pink blooms into the clear blue sky. And with all that's going on this year, I forgot to look for its brief bloom—and a few days ago I suddenly saw that flash of pink, and ran out to enjoy it, feeling like Ebenezer Scrooge when he wakes up the morning after the spirits have visited him, only it's *The Easter Carol*—“What day is it, boy?” “Why it's the 4th Sunday of Easter, sir!” “O, I haven't missed it! Easter is still blooming!”

The wonders and signs are continuing. I see them every day. Look for them. I heard this week about a minimum wage home healthcare worker named Recto who took the bus every day in New York City to take care of an elderly couple, and during the pandemic, the buses stopped running. So he's been paying cash out of his own pocket to take a cab each day to get to them so they can get the care they need. (as told by Sen. Chuck Schumer on “The Late Show,” CBS, 4/30/20)

As I was sharing with the kids earlier, Jesus promised he would be there as our good shepherd. In our Gospel reading, he promises that he goes ahead of us, leading us, and those who know his voice of resurrection follow him. And to follow him is to love as he loved. Last week I talked about Communion, and after church I went out and crumbled the leftover bread I had and cast it out onto the lawn, and I couldn't help but sing that song from “Mary Poppins”;

“Feed the birds, tuppence a bag, tuppence, tuppence, tuppence a bag’...

Though her words are simple and few

Listen, listen, she's calling to you,

‘Feed the birds, tuppence a bag

Tuppence, tuppence, tuppence a bag.’”

(“Feed the Birds” from “Mary Poppins, music and lyrics by Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman, 1964)

And out there on the Gilead lawn I started thinking of Jesus telling Peter three times if he really loved him, to feed his sheep (John 21), and I started singing this:

Feed my sheep, thus he did ask;

Feed them love them that is our task

*As the Lord gave you his all,
Love them, help them, that is our call.*

A friend of mine, a Gilead member, shared with me this week that she gave her cleaning woman an extra week's pay to make up for the time my friend was quarantined, because she knows her cleaner has very little income. At first the woman wouldn't take it, but my friend insisted, saying, "If you really don't need it, give it to your church." The next thing you know, the cleaning woman sent her a card with a fifty dollar bill, and a note saying, "For the Gilead Food Pantry."

Some time ago, I stumbled across a blog called *Robyn's Nest*, by Rev. Robin J. Plocher, in which she shares a personal story:

I don't remember her name, but I do remember her testimony. She was an elderly member of our church when I was a young teenager. She had been diagnosed with cancer and told she had very little time to live. That had been years before. She had outlived every doctor's prognosis. In a day when cancer might have been referred to in quiet whispers and somehow associated with shame and embarrassment, she found the grace and courage to openly share her story. When people went to call on her because she was homebound and ill, the caller always came away with their faith renewed. They went to make her feel better. They came away ministered to and feeling better themselves.

One year late in Lent this woman recorded a message to be shared at our church's United Methodist Women's monthly meeting. It so happened that my mom had the tape at home. She was listening to it in her bedroom one day, and that was how I came to hear the woman share her testimony in her own words.

"It will soon be Easter," she said. "But for me, every morning is Easter morning. Every day is a reminder of God's grace and love. Every day is a resurrection day, a new day of life and an opportunity to serve Him."

It seemed only fitting that a few days later, early on Easter Sunday morning, this remarkable saint left this life and went home to be with her Lord.
(<http://1thessalonians4-13.blogspot.com/2011/04/every-morning-is-easter-morning.html>)

Look for the signs. And be the wonder. Don't wait for a superhero, don't wait for Super Jesus. As the mom said to the two boys fighting over the last pancake, "Remember, Jesus would let his brother have the last one." To which the younger said to older brother, "Today you be Jesus." If you do, you'll find that every morning is Easter morning.

Amen.